



CENTER FOR  
Science IN THE  
Public Interest

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February 20, 2007

Senator Mary Ann Handley, Co-Chair  
Representative Peggy Sayers, Co-Chair  
Public Health Committee  
Connecticut General Assembly  
Room 3000, Legislative Office Building  
Hartford, CT 06106

Dear Senator Handley and Representative Sayers:

As a public health advocate who has long been concerned about the growing rates of obesity and nutrition-related diseases in the U.S., I am pleased that you are considering Senator Don Williams' legislation to require nutrition disclosure on menus and menu boards at fast-food and other chain restaurants. I urge you to approve this measure so that it can be written and considered by the entire Connecticut Assembly.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest is a non-profit health-advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C., with more than 14,600 members and subscribers in Connecticut. Among other accomplishments, CSPI led the effort to win passage of the law requiring nutrition labeling on packaged foods and to add trans fat to those labels. We worked closely with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene on their new calorie disclosure regulations, which will go into effect later this year.

Restaurant foods play an increasing and important role in the diet of Americans. Americans are eating more calories than two decades ago, which may be due in part to increases in eating out. Studies link eating out with higher caloric intakes and higher body weights. Children eat almost twice as many calories when they eat a meal at a restaurant compared to a meal at home.

In addition, foods that people eat from restaurants and other food-service establishments are generally higher in saturated fat and lower in nutrients, such as calcium and fiber, than home-prepared foods. In fact, it is not uncommon for a restaurant entree to provide half of a day's recommended calories, saturated and trans fat, or sodium. Include an appetizer, beverage or dessert, and it is easy to consume a whole day's calories, saturated and trans fat, or sodium in a single meal.

The average American eats out four meals a week; that is enough to lead to over-consuming calories not just on the day the person eats out but to exceeding calorie requirements over the course of a whole week. One order of cheese fries with ranch dressing contains 3,010 calories, a slice of carrot cake from the Cheesecake Factory has 1,560 calories, and a café mocha and pastry from Starbucks provides over 1,000 calories.

The Food and Drug Administration recommends that restaurants provide nutrition information that is easy to find and use at the point of decision making. Nutrition information on company websites requires that people have computers and access to the Internet before going out to eat. Information on tray liners or fast-food packages is not accessible to customers until after they

order. Brochures and posters are often hard to find and hard to read, providing overwhelming tables listing everything from protein and cholesterol to iron and vitamin A.

The financial burden placed on restaurants by requiring nutrition disclosure on menus is modest and is outweighed by the public good it would serve. I recommend that Senator Williams' legislation give restaurants the option of having nutrition analysis done by any method currently allowed by the Food and Drug Administration for food package labeling (i.e., using analytic methods and express nutrient content in a manner consistent with the Uniform Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act and implementing regulations). That would allow restaurants to use either laboratory analyses or menu analysis software.

Keep in mind that half of large chain restaurants already provide nutrition information on their websites and would not incur any new costs for analyzing their products. For those that would, the cost to have a product analyzed in a laboratory is about \$230 per menu item. A restaurant chain with 80 menu items would incur a one-time cost of approximately \$18,000 to have all its menu items tested – less than ten dollars for each Denny's outlet.

For restaurants looking to spend less, nutrition analysis software is readily available and not expensive, ranging in price from under \$100 to \$700. In addition, the National Restaurant Association provides technical assistance to restaurants to help them provide nutrition information to customers through its "Ask Us" program.

The cost of redesigning menus and menu boards would be modest. Many chain restaurants centralize menu development and printing, and restaurant headquarters incur the costs.

Strengthening food labeling is likely to yield significant health and economic benefits. The FDA estimated that requiring trans fat to be listed on packaged food labels would save 2,100 to 5,600 lives a year and \$3 billion to \$8 billion a year. USDA estimated the economic benefits of extending nutrition labelling to fresh meat and poultry to be \$62 million to \$125 million per year.

Considering the modest financial cost to restaurant chains, the large health benefit this information would provide to consumers, and the high health care costs of nutrition- and obesity-related diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes, menu labeling is a promising policy option for addressing poor nutrition and obesity.

I urge you to pass Senator Williams' proposed menu labeling legislation. Requiring menu labeling in Connecticut chain restaurants would be a key step in helping the residents of your state make informed choices for their own and their families' health.

Sincerely,



Margo G. Wootan, D.Sc.  
Director, Nutrition Policy